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Predictability and Subjectivity in John Green's *An Abundance of Katherines*

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Abstract

This study supplies a literary analysis of John Green's second novel, *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006). It examines the protagonist Colin's journey from essentialism to anti-essentialism, focusing on the nuanced shifts in his worldview. The process incorporates a variety of postmodern techniques, including pastiche, parody, Derrida's concept of *différance*, and Foucault's subjectivity. Through these elements, the analysis reveals that while the novel's plot structure may appear simplistic, its thematic depth and narrative strategies firmly position it within the realm of postmodern *Entwicklungsromane*.

Keywords: anti-essentialism, pastiche, parody, *différance*, subjectivity, *Entwicklungsromane*

An Abundance of Katherines (2006) is John Green's second literary work following his debut novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005). He is an award-winning author with more than 25 awards. He is the New York Times best-selling author of the fourth novel *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). His works received wide criticism, especially as young adult (YA) fiction. Green's influence extends beyond literature, as he also plays an active role in education and social commentary. He is remarkably active on different online platforms, such as his podcast series named *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (2018–2021), the vlog hosted with his brother Hank, *Vlogbrothers* (2007–present), and the YouTube channel

Crash Course (2012–present), to name but a few. John Green luxuriates in YA style of writing because he thinks that teenagers ask controversial life questions (Patrick) such as meaning, loss, and politics (Tamaki). The quest to fathom young people’s approach to life, in its transcendence, is the quest to understand and dig deep into humanity’s encounter and treatment of concepts as such vis-à-vis the historical process and the society they live in. Within the context of the postmodern, it alludes to the possibility of growth as opposed to the Romantic, Victorian, or Modern maturity. Green’s exploration of these themes invites readers to reconsider traditional notions of adulthood and personal development. Green’s straightforward and modest plot structures are juxtaposed with the nuanced description and dialogue of the characters. They reflect an idealist epistemology akin to the German subjective Idealist George Berkeley’s “Esse est Percipi” (*Big Ideas Simply Explained* 139). In other words, he does not complicate the plot as an independent isolated reality that the characters keep referring to. He instead explores how the characters uniquely construct their own reality as regards the storyline. For that precise reason, numerous criticisms of his works centre around psychoanalysis such as Jebaselvi and Sivakumar’s study *John Green’s Turtles All the Way Down: A Review on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in Adolescents* (2022).

Similarly, critics have approached *An Abundance of Katherines* from different interdisciplinary perspectives, including linguistics, psychology, identity, and mathematics. For example, *An Abundance of Katherines: The Game Theory of Baby Naming* (Blumer et al., 2024) and *Translation Strategies of Idiomatic Expressions in An Abundance of Katherines* (Wibowo and Supardi 2024). However, the novel has not been recognised for its postmodern elements and techniques. This study examines Green’s shift from a conventional social and individual conception to a more pragmatic viewpoint. The debate centres around the idea of predictability versus subjectivity. If human behaviours are taken for granted, the pattern of social order is assumed to be ordered, methodical, and consistent. Much like science, human behaviours can be predictable and are expected to meet certain expectations that align with a particular social pattern. Conversely, the idea of subjectivity is drawn from Foucault’s perception of identity as fluid and unforeseeable, where

simultaneously society dictates what the individual should do and how individuality contributes to society. This article suggests that Green guides the readers from an orthodox viewpoint to a more moderate one by considering the use of postmodern techniques and styles, such as parody, pastiche, Jacques Derrida's concept of *difference*, and Michel Foucault's notion of subjectivity. It also investigates how these techniques are employed in the postmodern *Entwicklungsroman* narrative genre, which reflects individuals' coping with capitalist society.

An Abundance of Katherines is a YA novel by John Green. It is a story that begins by identifying the protagonist as a child prodigy. The novel follows the tragedy of Colin Singleton, who has been dumped nineteen times by girls named Katherine. When the last of the Katherines abandons him, he embarks on a journey with his friend Hassan, during which they meet Lindsey, whose mother offers them a job and invites them to stay with her at her house. Colin has always dreamed of having his Eureka moment, just like any genius, grown-up, used-to-be child prodigy. The road trip brings a change after he falls and hits his forehead on the ground. His Eureka moment unfolds the possibility of anticipating future dumpings through the *Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability*. After multiple attempts to refine the theory, it proves unattainable since humans' behaviours are seldomly predictable. He eventually moves from an essentialist to an anti-essentialist philosophy of life, where he could be more open to possibilities manifested in his relationship with a non-Katherine; Lindsey.

When Green was asked about what inspired him to write the novel, he answered:

I'm really interested in why we are all so obsessed with mattering—why people in our historical moment are so fixated on fame and notoriety and leaving a legacy...So that was part of it. Also, at some point in your adolescence you become aware that you are not quite so special as you've been led to believe, and this is a pretty difficult thing to reconcile, and I wanted to write about a young man who was experiencing that in the most extreme way possible. (Green)

While primarily inspired by the idea of mattering during adolescence, he focuses more on its causes and consequences in a capitalist society.

Green is careful in identifying Colin with a set of characteristics that will always define his actions or his future in general. He is a child prodigy, a nerd, and only attracted to girls named Katherine. This illogical attraction stems from his intent to dramatise 'human mattering'. Amid this rigid identification, Green ironically opens a space for fluidity, represented in Colin's skill and fondness for anagramming. These attributes enslave the protagonist as he believes he should act and react accordingly, and violating any of these definitions would imply an identity crisis for him. For example, the significance of his identity is tightly bound to being a genius, and being a genius means doing something remarkable. He speculates, "What is the point of being alive if you don't at least try to do something remarkable?" (Green). John Green uses different postmodern techniques to shift from an essentialist to an anti-essentialist self-perception.

The author simultaneously capitalises on pastiche and adds to its meaning in an unprecedented way. Pastiche is a way to celebrate and honour classical and previous writing styles, techniques, and content. "The term can be used in a derogatory sense to indicate lack of originality, or more neutrally to refer to works that involve a deliberate and playfully imitative tribute to other writers" (Baldick 307). Frederick Jameson, however, condemns pastiche as it hampers the process of historicism (Constable 48). In the same way, Green ingeniously uses pastiche to both reverence other styles and rebuke the detachment of texts from their contexts. Through this, he challenges traditional boundaries of literary genres and allows for a more fluid interaction between past and present. By engaging with the works of others in this way, Green's writing becomes an ongoing conversation that transcends time and defies simple categorisation. The novel makes use of explanatory footnotes while paying tribute to academia, and Green experiments with them in various ways. Some footnotes provide real-world facts. For example, in a conversation with Lindsey, Colin informs her that he is reading a book on the invention of television to which Green refers in the footnote, "Television was invented by a kid. In 1920, the memorably named Philo T. Farnsworth conceived the cathode ray vacuum tube used in most all twentieth-century TV sets. He was fourteen. Farnsworth built the first one when he was just twenty-one" (Green 119). The

factual footnotes accent the identity of the protagonist as an intellectual character.

Certain footnotes include word translation. One of the central themes of the novel is Colin's Eureka moment which is the first footnote in the novel translated as "Greek: 'I have found it'" (3). Occasionally, the author also translates culturally specific items which is apparent when he translates the word Zakat to "Giving to the poor, one of the pillars of Islamic faith" (196). Referring to high culture languages like Greek or Latin is frequent in postmodern texts such as James Joyce *Ulysses* (1920). Moreover, due to the cultural hybridity and heterogeneity of postmodern society, the use of a multiplicity of languages reflects the inclusion ideology of the author. Green comfortably conveys the Islamic culture of the protagonist's best friend, Hassan, from whom Colin also learns. The last type of footnotes upholds the idea of metafictional narratives. Green intentionally follows the line of thought of Colin, making the narrative self-referential. It is challenging for Colin to socialise, and yet he creates a list of what may sound not interesting to other people so that he can manage everyday conversations; the footnote elaborates on the list that "among many, many others, the following things were definitely not interesting: the pupillary sphincter, mitosis, baroque architecture, jokes that have physics equations as punch lines, the British monarchy, Russian grammar, and the significant role that salt has played in human history" (26). The footnote also confirms the rigid identity of the protagonist as a nerd even during casual conversations. The nonlinearity of narratives is also made self-referential through footnotes. For example, he mentions an ambiguous event at the beginning of the novel and then refers to it in the footnote as "More on that late" (6), ensuring the circularity of narrativity.

Fiction writers customarily do not include footnotes because the readers are expected to interpret the meaning of narratives by themselves, considering that meaning is fluid and not fixed. Here comes John Green's plot twist. He uses footnotes throughout the novel except for chapter fourteen and the last chapter; chapter nineteen. When Green refers to the fixed identity of Colin that hinges on social and custom expectations, he uses footnotes that automatically direct the reader to other texts and expectations that

Colin should meet, assuring the deferral nature of texts. Green makes the novel ingeniously conscious of its intertextuality using footnotes alluding to the idea of Derrida:

There is no original meaning outside of signs, and signs do not possess clear and fixed meanings. Here the production of meaning in the process of signification is continually deferred and supplemented so that meaning slides down a chain of signifiers abolishing a stable signified. Words carry multiple meanings, including the echoes or traces of other meanings from other related words in other contexts. (Barker xviii)

However, when he touches on the unique experience of Colin and his transformation into a more flexible identity, he does not use footnotes because there is no outside text that can explain that unique experience. In this context, when juxtaposing chapters fourteen and nineteen with other chapters, pastiche reflects both the break from and necessity of traditions at the same time. It is indispensable for Colin to be self-conscious and to understand his place in the postmodern society. Moving away from traditions to construct his own conception of the world, on the other hand, secures the unique postmodern experience and ensures its historicity. Lindsey rethinks the relationship between the individual and traditions, she says to Colin in the cave,

I was thinking about your mattering business. I feel like, like, how you matter is defined by the things that matter to you. You matter as much as the things that matter to you do. And I got so backwards...All this time, there were real things to care about...You just get caught in being something, being special or cool or whatever, to the point where you don't even know why you need it; you just think you do." (200-201)

Traditions should not define the individual; instead, the individual draws on history – symbolised in the things that matter to him – to serve his own needs. Contrary to pastiche, parody devalues other texts, styles, and techniques using irony and humour to ascertain the postmodern identity and subvert the authority of traditions (Constable 48). Colin aspires to develop a theorem to predict future dumpings using mathematical functions and formulas. The variables of the equation are the result of variations in his past relationships. The attempt proves promising in the beginning as the variables seem fairly predictable. Psychologically speaking, age, popularity, breakup initiator, and introvert/extrovert personality

types all influence people's relationships with others (Corr and Matthews).

Unlike Adam Smith and Auguste Comte, who believe that societies are mimics of the predictable nature (Turner, Beeghley, and Powers), the postmodern project is primarily intrigued by the individual as a product of language and discourse (Sheehan 22-25). This also explains the emotional bond between Colin and anagramming. Colin seeks refuge in language play whenever he experiences inner turmoil. For example, when Katherin XIX served ties with him, he read a letter she had written for him, where she says at the end "yrs forever" after that "He anagrammed 'yrs forever' until he found one he liked: sorry fever. And then he lay there in his fever of sorry and repeated the now memorised note in his head and wanted to cry" (7). Moreover, Green was conscious of the impact of this technique within the postmodern context as he remarks in the appendix section of Q & A with JOHN GREEN,

anagrams say something about the malleability of language. We always think of language as an immovable object, as this set of codified and unbreakable rules. But when you consider that one can rearrange the letters in PRESBYTERIANS and spell BRITNEY SPEARS, it reminds us that language (and the stories we tell with language) can be twisted and molded. Words are not static. Language shapes our memories, and it is also shaped by our memories. Also, I can't think of a talent that is more simultaneously impressive and useless than anagramming. (234)

Within this idealist epistemology, society and human behaviour cannot be paralleled with nature. They cannot be measured or predicted, as language and meaning are in constant deferral (Barker 52). Green reveals that, although the variables may seem predictable, they are in constant flux and cannot be fully captured. One aspect that substantially alters any mathematical equation when applied to human behaviour is human memory, which proves to be flawed. When Colin fails to remember what happened with one of the Katherines; Katherin III, he realises that social predictability is unattainable due to memory imperfection for "The moral of the story is that you don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened" (207-208). Green, therefore, mocks the impossibility of capturing the constant actualisation/ imperfection of human memory by scientifically static mathematical formulas, which

creates a sense of frustration and futility for Colin and highlights the emotional weight of his quest.

Derrida's concept of *différance*, in addition to what has been mentioned earlier, means "both a difference and an act of deferring, to characterise the way in which linguistic meaning is created rather than given" (Britannica). It presents itself by ridiculing the essentialists' strict definitions and classifications. Green foregrounds the irony of the intransigence of naming and Colin's thinking, contrasting it with the fluidity and flexibility of what those labels and viewpoints attempt to capture. Colin insists on having relationships only with girls named Katherine. On the other hand, his clinging to the name Katherine meant clinging to his identity as well, reflecting his desperate need to control his surroundings to prove his own, unique existence. The irony is despite the resemblance of the name, each Katherine emanates different attributes, reflecting an anti-essentialist ideology of Derrida that meaning is in constant flux. For example, Katherine III was a brunette and a child prodigy, just like Colin. Katherine IV was a redhead who was very skilled at playing the violin, unlike Colin. The concept of *différance* also resolves the contradiction between the teleological nature of coming-of-age novels and postmodern fluidity and fragmentation. The coming-of-age novel follows the protagonist to reach maturity. However, since postmodernism commits itself to undermining existing mainstream structures, it causes the term 'maturity' to slip. What does it mean to mature in this sense? Is it what society expects the individual to achieve at a certain age, or what Green uniquely conveys in the emotionally charged chapters fourteen and nineteen? Derrida's maturity is being aware that meaning can never be fixed, and this is precisely what Colin arrives at by the end of the novel translated into his relationship with Lindsey.

The analysis may lead to a slightly subtle stance by Roberta Seelinger Trites in her renowned book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000). Trites posits that postmodern YA fiction complies with the *Entwicklungsroman* (10). *Entwicklungsroman* is a novel that aims at reaching growth rather than the maturity of the Victorian or *Bildungsroman* novels (9). The growth stems from the protagonist's acceptance of society as being the product of Capitalism, where capitalism implies both

interconnectedness with capital institutions and endless opportunities; she remarks "Institutions both empower and repress adolescents in the ways that they create new opportunities for teenagers while they simultaneously establish rules within which the teenager must operate" (xii). Power and repression are also central to Michel Foucault's contribution to Postmodernism. Foucault invests in the notion of subjectivity as opposed to essentialists' rigid conception of identity. He believes that the individual is the product of different capitalist powers that may empower, or otherwise, repress him/her. Heyes explains his idea as "'The subject' (le sujet) is not simply a synonym for 'person'; instead the term captures the possibility of being a certain *kind* of person, which, for the theorists who tend to use it, is typically a contingent historical possibility rather than a universal or essential truth about human nature" (159). This is most clearly demonstrated in Colin's construction of his reality although being influenced by notions of truth. Before Colin's growth, he wanted to meet certain expectations while he himself was unconsciously having his own definition of the world. For example, the way he defines dumping is different from the common definition of the term, this mainly reveals how confused Colin was at the beginning of the novel, so much so that he relied on radical definitions as a way to compensate for the uncertain feelings that overwhelmed him.

Entwicklungsroman recapitalises the debate by positioning the novel within postmodernism. The protagonist, Colin Singleton, grows not by rejecting social norms and institutions towards transcending his separateness, but by being connected to them and accepting the possible opportunities they offer. The last sentence of the novel reads, "Colin's skin was alive with the feeling of connection to everyone in that car and everyone not in it. And he was feeling not-unique in the very best possible way" (Green 215). Colin finally realises that everything is connected, and he cannot take delight in his isolation. Nevertheless, there are best possibilities within this connection which make the individual different but not separate. This recognition signifies a postmodern shift from an essentialist identity to one that is fluid and shaped by interactions and discourse. By embracing interconnectedness, Colin finds a new understanding of self that resists fixed definitions and acknowledges the complexity

of human relationships. He finally resolves his inner contradictions, making him comfortable in his own skin; something that allows him to take risks and seize opportunities within a capitalist society.

John Green's novel *An Abundance of Katherines* embodies the postmodern novel par excellence. Despite the simplicity of the plot structure, Green uses multiple techniques to erode essentialism. Pastiche, through the borrowing of academic footnoting, does not merely serve as blank imitation, as was widely accepted; rather, it supplements the text and, at the same time, invigorates the unique experience of the postmodern condition, proposing a semantic shift. Parody mocks the authority of traditional spaces by equating them with the exactitude of mathematics, which ineluctably fails to predict human behaviour. Colin's obsession with girls named Katherine to validate his identity alludes to Derrida's concept of *différance*, where Colin's attempt is vehemently contrasted by the diversified attributes of the different Katherines, denoting the impossibility of capturing meaning through definitions. The novel stands as a testament to the struggle between expectation and Foucault's subjectivity, where the unique experience of individuals can never be predicted because individuality does not epitomize traditions; it rather appropriates them. Finally, *Entwicklungsroman* proves to be the best genre representative of Colin's quest for subjectivity in a capitalist postmodern society.

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¹To be is to be perceived.